LIFE AND TIMES OF BIRSA BHAGWAN

By

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Shri S. P. Sinha's "Life and Times of Birsa Bhagwan" (1964), published by the Bihar Tribal Research Institute, the first in the proposed series of monographs, has been called "the first *authentic* biography" (in English) of the Munda leader, "a valuable contribution", an attempt towards "a well documented monograph on scientific lines", providing the Mundas "for the first time with a written authentic history of their own".

Though the "materials" at the writer's disposal were "large", he had to "curb his enthusiasm and to see that the book did not become so big as to tire the general reader". The writer no doubt utilises J. Tigga's and N. E. Horo's accounts, a few judgements and official documents, as available to him or rather arbitrarily selected, but he depends *mostly* on published materials contained in S. C. Roy's *the Mundas and their country*, Rev. J. Hoffmann's *Encyclopaedia Mundarica* (Vol. ii), *District Gazetteer of Ranchi*, J. Reid's Report on *Survey and Settlement operation in Ranchi* (1902-10), K. K. Dutta's *History of the Freedom Movement in Bihar* (Vol. i), Muchi Rai Munda's *Birsa Bhagwan* (1948), and Priyanath James + Purti, *Sahid Birsa Munda* (1951). He does not make use of Birsaites' indigenous accounts, the Jaipur or Rogoto manuscripts—he claims to have seen the first but did not consider it "original" without giving any reasons—the mass of materials available in the National Library, National Archives (proceedings), other records of the trials in the High Court, the *Bengalee* and its informative editorials and coverage of trials. Though he claims to know Birsaites, he apparently has not made any study of them. Nor is he quite familiar with Mission reports or writings such as *Quarterly papers of S. P. G. Mission* (October, 1895), *Report on Chotanagpur Mission*, Walter Holsten's *Johannes Evangelista Gossner*, H. Josson's *La Mission du Bengalee Occidental* and T. Schueren's *Belgian Mission of Bengal among the Aboriginal Tribes of Chotanagpur*. This leads him to infer wrongly that European Missionaries did not leave any "memoir of that great event" (p. iii). True, for a monograph which attempts to present in a "small compass" the biography of Birsa, full utilisation of these materials is not necessary,

but to be authentic, particularly about a subject like Birsa and his movement largely shrouded in hearsays and available in partial and even defective published materials, familiarity with these sources would have saved the writer from many blunders and an uncritical repetition of the errors of published materials. This could have been very well done within the compass of 176 pages of the book, summarising or deleting some of the materials (F. B. Taylor's judgment, for instance) and avoiding unnecessary repetitions.

To give only a few of the glaring errors not of language and technique of presentation, but of facts regarding Birsa's life and movement ; Birsaites do not keep away from courts, "an engine of terror", "towns and administration" (p. iii) ; I had the pleasure of knowing and entertaining them at Khunti. Birsa did not dictate any book to Bharmi Munda in jail (p. iii) ; the missionaries did not play any role in "formulating more stringent laws concerning Bhuinhari Survey" (p 39) ; Birsa was born not at Ulihatu (p. 45) but at Bamba. It is strange that the writer comes to a wrong conlusion about Birsa's place of birth, even when the evidence of the confirmation register (German Mission, Chaibasa, entry no. 178) which he has seen, is clear. In the column under "*Wohnort*" in the register, it is usually the place of birth and not the residence that is recorded. Birsa's brother, Pasana, who was four years younger than he, was born at Chalkad and thus Birsa's parents could not have stayed at Bamba till 1886 (p. 45, footnote). Birsa's direct relations at Pangura and Barigara could have given correct information on the points of his birth and early life. Birsa was not taken from Bamba to Khatanga (p. 46) but from Bamba or Chalkad to Ayubhatu where his mother's sister lived and from there to Khatanga. He was not "taught" up to the "Upper Primary Standard" at Burju (p. 46), because the school was only a lower primary school then ; nor was he baptised there (p. 46), but at Sinjuri/Chalkad by Abhiram Pracharak. There is little evidence to show that Birsa was a "genius" at school (p. 47). He was not admitted to the middle school at Chaibasa (p. 46); it was only an upper primary school then. Birsa did not leave the school (p. 47) but was probably expelled from there or withdrawn by his father under the Sardars' influence. The account of Birsa being impressed with stories of the Valour of "Ram, Lakshman, Bhim and Arjun" and developing an abhorrence for the malpractices of Zamindars (p. 48) at Bandgaon is most fanciful. There is nothing to indicate in Birsa's writings and compositions that he was so impressed by Hindu legendry heroes ; the Zamindar of Bandgaon was not a *Diku* but a tribal chief (though Hinduaised) and his "malpractices"

in *Khuntkatti* area were certainly different from those of *Diku* Zamindars. The writer calls Birsa a "perfect Sokha" (witch-doctor) who was gifted with magical powers (p. 48) and practised medicine and studied *Ayurveda* (?), a *Yogi* who meditated under a tree (p. 49), Vaiṣṇava who came in contact with a Vaiṣṇava saint and was "so influenced by the doctrine of non-violence" that he "gave up hunting and non-vegetarian food" (p. 48). In fact Birsa was not a *Sokha* because he attacked witch craft, magic and spirits ; he did not give up non-vegetarian food altogether and practice non-violence. The commotion in 1895 is called the "first rising" (Chap. III), though there was no clash of arms, not even a shot was fired. The writer does not explain how the "prophet of Chalkad" who preached "non-violence" could preach sedition and precipitate a revolt in 1895 (pp. 56-57). A "fanciful" account of Birsa's service among his people striken by epidemic and famine on his release from the jail in Nov. 1897 is given (pp. 70-71), though there was hardly any raging famine or epidemic at that time (the famine of 1896-97 had come to an end in August-September) ; there is no evidence, Birsaites or official, to show that Birsa organised such a service. His and his men's release had nothing to do with the release of prisoners to mark the Diamond Jubilee of the reign of Queen Victoria (p. 70). In fact, Birsa had completed his term of sentence (2 years) in Nov. 1897 and his men had been released much earlier.

The most important phase of Birsa movement (Nov. 1897—April 1900), about which a mass of evidence is available, receives a poorer factual treatment. The rising in 1899-1900 is called the second uprising (p. 80) though it was the only uprising. Birsa visited Chutia in search of Munda's "record of rights" ; there is no evidence to indicate that he preached that "*Singbonga* should be worshipped in place of so many idols" (p. 81) and drove away all *bongas* out of the temple. He, in fact, repudiated *Singbonga*. There is also no evidence to suggest that Birsa preached non-violence in Jagarnathpur temple ; he only spoke against the aliens' practice of bullock-sacrifice (p. 81) while he himself sacrificed goats on social occasions at Chalkad and Rogoto meetings (Bharmi Munda, Account of Birsa). We are told that Birsa was for non-violence and restrained his followers from using weapons (p. 86) and yet he also asked them to prepare bows that would shoot like guns (p. 86). The "Votary of non-violence" claimed for himself that "once he had walked through the treasury and had cut down a man" (pp. 86-87) ; he sought to "equip his men with a strong character to enable them to give a stubborn fight to his enemies" (p. 112). Birsa "restrained" his followers from "shoo-

ting any body dead" (p. 88), yet he allowed "token shooting", under pressure, that would "draw the attention of the Government to their suffering" (p. 88). If so what was the use of replacing the British Raj by his own Raj which was the main objective ? Yet unmindful of these contradictions, the writer affirms that Birsa forbade use of violence, without giving any piece of evidence, Birsa's own words or any contemporary evidence in support of his contention. He even twists Birsa's words. While correctly quoting him (footnote, p. 86) exhorting his people not to use weapons *now*, he drops the last word in the text and makes out that Birsa opted for non-violent method and restrained his followers for using weapons (p. 86-87). The fact was that Birsa on his release from the jail only cautioned his followers and advised them to adopt "religious means" which is not wholly a peaceful or non-violent means ; later his advocacy of violence, under the Sardars' influence, was uninhabited. Poor Gaya Munda has been credited with a role far beyond his years ; he was not the commander-in-chief (p. 88), but only a defiant an old man.

The writer gives details of incidents during the uprising which never took place and which do not agree with his own list of incidents (pp. 90-91 and 107) : no constable or *chaukidars* were killed at Burju Mission (p. 90) ; no squad of police attacked the Birsaite mob in which one constable was killed on 6th Jan. (p. 90) ; the constable was not killed at Khunti Police Station (p. 90) but in the village ; the Deputy commissioner did not arrive at Khunti on 8th Jan. ; Mundas were not defeated by Cap. Roche near Sarwadah (p. 91). The writer mistakes Dombari hill which he incorrectly describes as the Mound of the dead (pp. 91 -92) for Sail Rakab ; the shooting actually took place on the second hill ; Topore buru does not mean Mound of the dead but the shooting hill. The carnage at sail Rakab (to writer Dombari hill) fires the writer's imagination : many people were burnt up, though there is no evidence to indicate that there was any fire on the hill. How could hundreds of people be killed, when there were according to contemporary account 100 or 150 persons present on the hill and the space avaliable on top of the hill and the eleven *Sangars* could not have sheltered a large number of people? The hill was certainly not blocked ; the fugitives could and did escape. The account is also not chronologically arranged. Gaya Munda did not die in the manner described (p. 101) ; he lived to be hanged with his son. The encounter with Deputy Commissioner at Etkedih took place on the 6th Jan. and should have figured in Chap. VIII. The statement of results of trial (footnote, page. 105) does not give a complete pictute. While correctly giving the area of operations (in miles) of the rebels without

any reference and inverted commas, he comes to a wrong conclusion in the same breath : "whole of Chotanagpur was rocked by Birsaites" (p. 107) ; in fact only the Police Stations of present Khunti subdivision, Ranchi, Basia and Bano and northern part of Chakradharpur Police Station (of Singhbhum) were affected. It is wrong to say that Birsa Movement was not a continuation of Sardar *Larai* (p. 116) ; Birsa himself had started as a Sardar Agitator and his movement was not only a continuation but also an advance on Sardar Agitation. In his chapter on "Press reactions" there is no mention of Surendra Nath Banerjee's the *Bengalee* which did more than the *Statesman* and the *English man*, through its editorials and coverage of Munda trials, to educate and arouse public opinion about the Munda cause.

The treatment of Birsa's religion (Chap. V) is a mere reproduction of the facts contained in published materials. A first-hand study of the Birsaites would have exploded the old theories; Birsa repudiated both *Singbonga* and *Sarnaism.* He did not totally forbid sacrifice, preach love of all creatures (he certainly did not overflow with milk of human kindness towards his racial enemies) and abstention from non-vegetarian food (pp. 76 ff.). His religion was not a "conscious" amalgam or emulation of Hinduism and Christianity, but a demonstrative attack on them as evident from desecration of Chutia temple. He certainly did not emulate Ram and Krishna (p. 109). He only sought to revive the "ingredients of his old culture as he understood them. The account of Religious movement is not only erroneous but utterly incomplete; Birsa's religious movement was complete in its institutional, regulatory, theoretical and prophetic" respects, with which the writer is not familiar.

The writer's bombasts further detract from the merit of the work. The Munda movement did not "shake the British throne" (p. 11). Though the uprising was a serious affair, it did not "throw the administration out of gear" (p. 107); the Mundas were hardly a match for British army. Second, to the writer's fertile imagination, the "human carnage" at Dombari was a "tragedy no less ghastly than the famous Jalianwala Bag incident." In fact, according to official estimate the people killed or wounded at Sail Rakab included 8 dead and 5 wounded (plus latter two were reported dead and four wounded) as a result of three volleys of firing and subsequent firing on fugitives; these figures could not be much wide of the mark. Jalianwala Bag incident involved 379 persons killed and 1200 wounded under the fire of 1600 rounds of amunitions. The second

incident changed the course of the National Movement; the Sail Rakab tragedy was all but forgotton (except in folklores). Third, there is no evidence to indicate that Birsa danced his way from village to village (he in fact, reprimanded Bharmi Munda for "waving about", Bharmi Munda, *op. cit.*) like Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (p. 77); he only danced Munda Jadur number on Simbua and Dombari hills and bitterly attacked and forbade alien dances like Karma etc. Fourth, Birsa is linked on one hand with the "wisest of the sages in our Vedas, Upaniṣads and Tripiṭakas" (p. 79), because of his solitary saying "Do not be afraid, the body decays but not the soul" and on the other with Mahatma Gandhi and "liberator heroes like Ram, Krishna and Christ who in their own times had waged a war against ignorance, injustice and oppression" (p. 53). His followers are said to have shown a "bravery" (rather stubbornness) "which is rare in history for centuries" (p. 79). Such statements betray a poor sense of balance.

The writer's preconceived notions of and his obsession with Birsa's non-violence and nationalism (he anticipates his conclusions in the first chapter itself) leads him to draw hasty conclusions from wrong facts. Birsa is hailed as an apostle of non-violence and non-cooperation who experimented with these techniques "with success" (p. v) long before Mahatma Gandhi; the Mundas also "to some extent surpassed Gandhian non-cooperation movement" (p. v). The writer does not bother to explain the "how" of it. There is not a shred of evidence to indicate that Birsa or Mundas (could have) developed or practised the philosophy or art of non-violence or non-cooperation at their stage of historical development. Yet the writer "invents" a few facts in support of his contention : Birsa preached "non-cooperation" with the landlords as a result of which the "Deputy Commisssioner was fearful of the consequences of the shortage of food in this area because the Mundas had left ploughing their fields and had encamped at Chalkad" (p. 112). This is a travesty of facts. No doubt, the Sardars advocated non-payment of rent, but people leaving cultivation had nothing to do with this unique "brand" of non-cooperation which even Mahatma Gandhi did not discover, but with the general excitement over the advent of a prophet at Chalkad. There is no evidence to bear out this line of the writer's reasoning. The writer dose not explain how Mundas, bitter and disillusioned after 40 years of Sardar *larai*, agrarian disorder and tension, admitted by him, could have suddenly stumbled upon *Satyagrah* and *Ahimsa*, idioms foreign to their ways of life (as partially described by the writer himself).

As regards non-violence, the writer adduces facts which are not

correct. First, Birsa was arrested by Meares "but his followers though in overwhelming number did not commit violence" (p. 112). In fact, the Government sought to apprehend Birsa on 24th August because all leading "*Gurus*" had gone away from Chalkad on the mission to collect arms in pursuance of the plan of a violent (not non-violent) uprising on 26th August and there were only a few people left at Chalkad". Birsa unlike a *S*atyagrahi resisted, being arrested, and shouted for help. Some people came to his rescue but they were repulsed. The show of arms impressed his followers who could not attempt the rescue. Second, there is no evidence to suggest that Birsa preached non-violence in 1895 (p. 113); he claimed that he only preached his religion (till the Sardars joined hands with him). Third, to dub the demonstration at Khunti on 24th Oct., 1900 a "scene of non-cooperation movement" (p. 113), "non-violent and peaceful" demonstration (p. 79) is stretching one's imagination too far. In fact, the people had collected there in response to a notice circulated by Government calling upon them to witness Birsa's trial which would explode the myth of his "divinity". The people only protested at the delay in the trial of Birsa and were ready to court imprisonment for the same. But more "peaceful" protest is not non-cooperation or whole of it. Yet this incident was sufficient, for the writer, to establish the claim of 'unsophisticated Munda' to being "the forerunners of the non-violent revolutionary movement" (p. 65). The "epidemic of arrow-shooting and house burning" (details are admitted by the writer) and Birsa's own violent outbursts and exhortations to his followers (with which the writer is not familiar), the brutality with which the rebels shot arrow at children and women show the essentially violent character of the Mundas' movement under Birsa.

A few words about Birsa's so-colled "nationalism". To the writer when "none of the political leaders of India dared to think of such revolutionary slogans", the Mundas claimed Independence (for "*abua disum*" wrongly translated as their land, p. v), self determination ; they were thus the "precursors of revolutionary nationalist leaders who made the British quit India" (p. 107), affording a glimpse of "Quit India Movement of Mahatma Gandhi" (p.1). The writer regrets that Ranchi in 1900, "was not ready to receive the hero of Dombari as national champion" (p. 102). Such statements do not only show ignorance of national movement in India from 1859-1901 but also confusion of "local patriotism" with nationalism. The first plays an important role in the promotion of the second movement because both are directed against the alien authorities, but while the first stands for the "independence" of a "region", the second is stimulated

by a wider vision and purpose. The Mundas were not fighting for the nation, a concept of which they were innocent at their stage of historical development, but their *disum*, their land. To seek to draw a parallel between Birsa on one hand and Tilak, Surendra Nath Banerji and Mahatma Gandhi on the other (p. 13) is to betray a poor sense of history.

A merit of the book may be said to lie in its illustrations, but a few of these are misleading. The original home of Birsa at Ulihatu was in fact built by Komta Munda, his elder brother, on his return from Khatanga after Birsa's arrest and death ; it is not old enough—as its sturdy poles will indicate—to be Birsa's house. Birsa was also not baptised as Burju Mission. It is very doubtful if the two buildings of the German Mission at Chaibasa could be considered old enough to be those where Birsa lived or studied. The illustration showing the rivulet near or below Chalkad is wrong ; the constable's utensils were thrown at a place a mile from Chalkad. Dombari is incorrectly shown as the Mound of the Dead.

Thus the picture of Birsa and his movement that emerges is not only incomplete but far from authentic. It does not do justice to the subject. Instead of wasting his sentiments (pp.i-ii) the writer could have dispassionately, though sympathetically, studied the evolution of this brand of leadership. This would have spared him the strain of his imaginative flights across the entire spectrum of Indian history and legends (the writer's fulsome panegyrics must have made Birsa turn in his grave — in embarrassment !). Birsa was not like Ram, Krishna, Chirst or Gandhi, but a simple tribal leader, drawing no doubt on Christian and Hindu reformist elements, but basically seeking to revive and re-create his old order in the face of the twin challenges of the disintegration of agrarian system and culture change in his small shrinking world with all the means, political and religious, at his command. If he could be compared with anybody at all, it was with the leaders of similar movements, Kurma Bhimu of the Gond Rebellion, Govindgiri of Bhil uprising, Bhagirit and Dubia Gossain of Kherwar movement.

Space prevents further additions to the catalogue of errors. Instead of rushing the book through the press, the Research Institute should have ensured that the facts are carefully scrutinised and the interpretations of Birsa and his movement make sense to readers and historians. The Institute has done no service either to administrators serving in tribal areas (p. iii) or to generations of readers by dishing out such erroneous, distorted and inflated facts and interpretations regarding Birsa and his movement.